

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

Cover photograph by Gerald Adams

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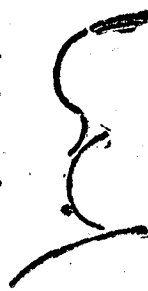
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If, for a change, you would like to spend part of an evening with a few rats, enter now into Charlie's living room. Whatever else you may have to say about your visit, you won't find it dull! Not with fifty policemen outside; one gun and one woman inside.



When he came through the front door of Charlie's house, he let us know his name was Brice. I guess he did that because it wasn't a secret to the cops outside. They got there thirty seconds later and now they were waiting for him to make a break.

He tried to keep an eye on the three of us and look out of the window at the same time. Finally he stuck the .45 into his back pocket and fingered a cigarette from his shirt pocket. His hand shook when he made the light, but it steadied when he saw that we were watching him.

Charlie and I were on the davenport and Charlie's face was puffy with scare. His wife Deva was in one of the armchairs. Her green eyes met mine for a moment and I wondered what she was thinking about now.

Brice studied Charlie. "You're the one who owns this place?"

Charlie licked his lips. "Yes, sir."

Some of the cops outside were fooling around with a loudspeaker,

bullet-proof

by Jack Ritchie

trying to make it work. From the noises it made it was giving them a hard time.

Brice squinted over his cigarette. "Two hundred and fifty pounds of you and all sweating."

Charlie blinked at the wetness in his eyes and looked away.

Brice moved over to me. "I'll bet you thought he was a man. He's big enough."

I crossed my legs. "I wouldn't know."

"How do you fit in, mister?" Brice wanted to know.

"A friend of the family," I said.

He glanced at Deva and then back to me. "This your second home?"

"I haven't been here in six months," I said. "I got here five minutes before the cops chased you

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in." I looked at Charlie, but he wasn't listening.

My eyes went to the canvas satchel in a corner of the room. "That why they're after you?"

He nodded. "Five thousand, I figure. It was a small bank. You can't expect too much."

"Don't cry about that," I said. "Cry because you won't be able to spend it."

He blew smoke out of the side of his mouth. "Don't bet on it, mister. Don't bet on it."

I considered Brice once again. We could have taken him, Charlie and me. He wasn't being too careful. But Charlie wasn't worth anything at all the way he was and I wasn't going to try it alone.

Deva stretched her slim legs. "You might as well tell us what you have in mind," she said to Brice.

Brice's eyes went over the flow of her body. "When it's nice and dark, I'll let you lead me out of here. It's been a long time since I had good company."

He was grinning when he turned to Charlie. "Is she good company, mister?"

Charlie didn't know if he was supposed to answer that. He swallowed hard.

Brice jumped when the loudspeaker outside squealed a couple of times. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

There were other noises out there too. Voices that you couldn't quite make out, the slam of car doors, the sound of motors.

"This isn't any good now, Brice," I said. "Write it off the books and give up. You'll be alive to think of something better next time."

The room had been getting darker, but suddenly light shafted through the windows from the outside.

Brice cursed and darted for the window. He crouched there and I thought he was going to shoot.

But he got slowly to his feet and when he turned, his eyes held something that I couldn't quite understand.

"The bastards," he said softly. "The damn bastards."

"Searchlights," I said. "Did you figure they'd let it get dark for you?"

He looked at me for a few seconds and then smiled faintly. "Sure," he said. "That's what's bothering me, isn't it, smart boy? The searchlights."

The loudspeaker crackled again a few times and now it worked.

"Brice," it said, its voice loud metal, "this is Lieutenant Jim Neilson. You know you're surrounded and you haven't got a chance in the world of getting

away with this. Use your head, Brice. Throw out your gun and come out with your hands up."

Brice looked at Deva. "Over here, pretty girl. I want you to do some talking."

Deva hesitated, looked at me.

"Come over here!" Brice ordered sharply.

Deva shrugged and got to her feet.

"Tell them that I want Neilson to come to the front door alone. Tell them I want him to come unarmed and to keep his hands where I can see them."

Deva stood outlined against the lights and did what he had ordered her to do.

We waited five minutes. Then I heard footsteps come up the gravel path and then mount the three steps to the front door.

Brice let Neilson inside and toed the door shut behind him.

Jim Neilson was a middle-aged man in uniform with cold gray eyes. He glanced around the room. "Are you folks all right?"

"They're real fine," Brice said. "Warm and healthy."

Neilson faced him. "You about decided to act sensible?"

Brice's smile was tight. "At seven-thirty I want those lights off. I want a car waiting. A fast car with plenty of gas."

Neilson shook his head, but he knew there was more coming.

Brice used the .45 as a pointer. "I'm taking her with me."

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Neilson met his eyes. "It won't work, Brice."

Brice still smiled. "My gun will be in her back. My finger only has to twitch and it'll be enough. I can twitch, Neilson. Even with a bullet in my brain."

Neilson's eyes went to his watch. "Seven-thirty will come and go and nothing will happen." He leaned forward slightly on his toes.

The .45 came up. "I got one, Neilson. So don't try anything."

Neilson's lips parted and he sighed. "As long as you're sure of that I won't . . ."

"You can count on it," Brice said.

Neilson shrugged and went to the door. "I'll give you until eight, Brice. Remember that."

I waited until Neilson was gone and then I said, "I've just been wondering. Suppose you get shot in the head and still live?"

Brice waited.

"What I mean is that you could live to be seventy, but maybe you're blind. Or paralyzed. Ever think of that, Brice?"

He didn't answer. I went on, "I wonder how many cops are out there. Could be fifty or more and a lot of them young. You know what I mean, Brice. Young and rash. They get orders to let you go by, but there's always bound to be one in the crowd who thinks it's worth the gamble. Maybe he doesn't know that a man with a

bullet in his brain can twitch."

"The lights will be off," Brice said. "Nobody will take a chance of getting me in the dark."

"All it takes is a flick of the finger and they come on," I said. "You'll be on a stage then, Brice. If you shoot Deva, they'll cut you down in two seconds. If you don't, they'll know you're bluffing."

Brice moved a step closer. "Shut up!"

I looked down at my hands and shut up.

Brice began pacing the room, but he was careful not to get too near the windows. His eyes found the electric clock every half minute. Finally, at a quarter after seven he seemed to have reached a decision.

Brice said, "If I killed one of you, they'd know I meant business."

He looked hard at Charlie, then grinned at Deva. "A baby like you wants more than what he is. What was the magnet? Money?"

Deva said nothing.

Brice ran a hand through his hair. He found another cigarette and his hand went over his pockets, searching for matches.

"You'll find some in the drawer of that table," I said.

Brice went to the table and stuffed a couple of book matches into his pockets.

He looked at me, his eyes thoughtful, and then he grinned. "Let's not talk about me getting

shot in the head. Let's talk about you knowing your way around this house when you haven't been in it for six months. Maybe you know where she keeps her nylons too?"

Charlie stared straight ahead, but now he was listening.

Brice turned to Deva. "You'd be all broken up if I put a bullet in your husband's head." It was a half question.

The same thing came into Deva's eyes that had hit me.

I looked at Deva and it was very quiet in the room. My lips felt dry. "That's right, Brice," I said to him. "They'd know you meant business."

Brice's eyes watched Deva.

There was a silence and she looked at the clock. "It's past seven-thirty, Brice, and the lights are still on."

He stared at the clock.

Deva's voice was soft and clear. "Show them you mean business, Brice. Just one bullet. That's all it takes."

Brice smiled at the secret that was Deva's and mine, and now wasn't completely a secret anymore.

"I can get you more money, Brice," Deva said. "A lot more than that five thousand dollars."

Brice studied her for half a minute and then shook his head slowly. And he kept smiling.

Deva's face got hard. "It's the only way you can get out of this."

Brice looked at the clock again.

He was through. I could tell that. He was going to give up. I got to my feet.

Brice turned. "Sit down!"

"I'll stay up," I said.

He looked at me curiously and then shrugged. "I'll let you have it your way, mister."

I moved toward him. "Give me the gun, Brice."

His eyes narrowed. "Take one more step and I'll blow your head off."

Like hell you will, I thought. But I hesitated. I could feel Charlie's eyes boring into me.

Brice's eyes looked deep into mine. "Sure," he said softly. "You can have the gun."

He handed it to me and there was laughter in his face. "Do we go outside now? Is that what you got in mind, mister?"

"Is that what you thought, Brice?" I asked quietly.

He shrugged, "I'll wait and see."

I looked at Deva. "Here's how it happened, honey: Charlie and I tried to take the gun from Brice. He shot Charlie and got himself killed in the struggle."

Deva's eyes glittered. "Yes. That's what happened. It's better than our way, much better. Thank you for coming, Mr. Brice."

Fear had taken away the bones in Charlie's body. He didn't want to believe what was happening.

"Make it good," Brice said, and there was something in his face that I couldn't understand.

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"Make it good," he said again.
"Charlie first. You owe me that."

"I owe you that," I agreed.

I moved away from him slightly and swung the gun on Charlie. The slug rammed into his chest where I wanted it to. He was dead before he hit the floor.

I swung back quickly, ready for anything Brice might try; but he just stood there, waiting for it.

I squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

I could hear footsteps outside moving swiftly toward the house.

Brice smiled. "Neilson knew I had only one left. He knew there was only one. But he was worried about you, baby. I wonder what he's thinking right now."

"Brice," Deva's face was white, her words fast and urgent. "I can get you money. Lots of it, Brice. Money can buy a lot of things. It

can buy you out of prison. I didn't have anything to do with this. You understand, Brice? Nothing at all!"

"I might see it that way, baby. Talk fast. What's the deal?"

"I'll be waiting for you when you come out. You can have anything you want. There's plenty of money. You can tell, look around. This house, the car, the stocks and bonds. All of it mine."

"Ours."

"Ours," she agreed.

"That's the deal, then. And," his eyes stopped smiling, "no welching, baby. I got friends, if you know what I mean."

I hit her with the butt of the gun, once, and then Neilson and his men were inside and they were on me before I could do anything more.

Brice stood there, looking at me. He was smiling.



Hair-brained Idea

Just when store detectives think they have uncovered every trick of the fine art of shoplifting, a new one turns up. Department stores in Dallas reported a series of wrist watch thefts. Finally the thief was caught, walking out of a store with a wrist watch band sticking out of the back of his head. The man, who was completely bald, was hiding the watches under a toupee!